CONSCIENCE

by

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Source: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 9:2/65, pp. 68-74.

Much of uncommon interest and value is said by the Eastern Fathers concerning the important human faculty known as conscience. Their teaching on this subject is based on Holy Scripture and on the spiritual experience, a fruit of a life ordered in accordance with the revealed word of God. From this results the remarkable unity of the teaching, a unity which teachings that are merely human, products of man's sense-experience, imagination, and reasoning, lack. What is said in Scripture is repeated by the Fathers, interpreted, illustrated, amplified. The later Fathers reiterate what was said by the earlier ones, confirm it, often elaborate it. There is here a stable, self-consistent, growing sacred tradition.

The terms which the Greek Fathers use to denote conscience are *syneidesis* and *syneidos*. The first of these terms occurs in the New Testament. Most of the New Testament references are in the Epistles of the Apostle Paul. In his Epistles conscience is distinguished from *nous*, the mind or rational faculty, and from the "heart" (*kardia*). It is distinguished from the mind when Paul remarks: "In the case of the defiled and the unbelieving, nothing is pure, both their mind and their conscience being defiled" (TIT. 1: 15); and from the heart, when he says: "The end of the commandment is love out of a pure heart and a good conscience" (I TIM. 1:5). Conscience is spoken of as being either good or evil, clear or defiled. It is clear when in all respects we live as we ought to; and defiled, when we act wrongly. An accompaniment of a clear conscience is joy:

"Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly sincerity" (II COR. 1: 12). Paul also makes reference to conscience in the Acts of the Apostles. He speaks of following conscience in relation to God and to neighbor. "And herein do I exercise myself," he says, "to have always a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men" (24: 16).

Significant statements about conscience are also made by the Apostles John and Peter. John speaks of the scribes and Pharisees as "being censured (*elenchomenoi*) by their conscience" (8:9), while Peter stresses the need of having a "good conscience toward God" (I PETER 3: 21).

The distinction of conscience from the other powers, which we noted in Paul, appears also in the writings of the Eastern Fathers. Conscience is distinguished in their works from the rational faculty, the will, the imagination, etc. It is clearly not taken to be something acquired, a mere product of social conditioning, as it is fashionable to say today, but is viewed as a distinct faculty or power (*dynamis*) implanted in the soul by God.

Conscience, the Fathers tell us, is a *moral guide* and *judge* and also an *awakener* of higher thoughts and feelings. In its operation as a moral guide, it acts both negatively and positively. It tells us not only what is evil and, hence to be avoided, but also what is good and hence to be done. Thus, Abba Dorotheos, one of the great ascetic-mystical Fathers who was in his prime at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh centuries, says in his *Contrite Discourses*: "When God created man, He implanted in him a certain divine power with a spark, like a warm and luminous thought, to illumine the mind and show it what is good and what evil. This is called conscience, and is natural law" (*Katanyktikoi Logoi,* Volos, 1960, p. 33). The importance of conscience as a moral guide is stressed also by St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John Climacus, and other Fathers. Maximus says: "Do not dishonor your conscience, which always gives you excellent counsel. For it offers you divine and angelic advice" (*Philokalia*, Athens, 1893, Vol. I, p. 223). Similarly, John Climacus, author of the remarkable Ladder of spiritual ascent, tells us: "After God, let us have conscience as our aim and rule in everything" (*Klimax*, Constantinople, 1883, p. 124).

Intimately related to conscience's activity as a moral guide is its operation as a moral judge. Conscience judges our acts as to rightness and wrongness. When we act rightly, it remains silent, whereas when we act wrongly it censures us. In this role as a judge, conscience is impartial. The Fathers stress this impartiality. Thus St. John Chrysostom remarks: "Within con science there are no flatterers, no wealth to corrupt the judge" (*Homilies on Timothy*, V). And St. John Climacus asserts: "He who has obtained the fear of the Lord, has given up lying, having his conscience as an unbribable judge" (*op. cit.*, p. 80).

When we act rightly, it was remarked, conscience remains silent, uncensuring. "He who follows all the Divine commandments," remarks St. Nicodemus the Aghiorite, an eighteenth century Greek Father, "acquires an uncensuring (*akatagnostos*) conscience" (*Encheiridion*, Athens, 1801, p. 186). Such a person is known as a saint. But there are instances where the absence of remorse of conscience, far from being a sign of righteous life, is a result of extreme depravity. John Climacus remarks: "Let us observe carefully whether our conscience has ceased to accuse us, not as a result of our purity, but because we are plunged in wickedness" (*op. cit.*, p. 58). Thus, a non-accusing conscience is a sign that one is either a saint or a great sinner. Abba Thalassios, a contemporary of Maximus the Confessor, puts the matter this way: "Those alone are not accused by their conscience who have either reached the summit of virtue or have sunk to the depths of vice" (*Philokalia*, I, 330).

Accompanying the quiet of conscience that occurs in the saint are inner peace, hope, moral courage, fearlessness of death, higher knowledge, spiritual love and joy. The joy that comes from having a clear conscience is especially emphasized by the Fathers. Thus Chrysostom remarks: "As for good spirits and joy, it is not greatness of power, not abundance of wealth, not pomp of authority, not strength of body, not sumptuousness of the table, not the adorning of dresses, nor any other of the things in man's reach that ordinarily produces them, but spiritual success and a good conscience alone. And he that has his conscience cleansed, even though he be clad in rags and struggling with famine, is of better spirits than they that live softly" (*Homilies on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, II). Epitomizing the Patristic teaching on this point, Nicodemus the Aghiorite says: "To have an unaccusing conscience is indeed the pleasure of pleasures and the joy of joys" (*Encheiridion*, p. 186).

In the case of the extremely bad, the silence of conscience is that of a faculty which is no longer alive at the level of ordinary consciousness. Such quiet is the final result, not only of repeated wrong actions over a long period, but also of rationalizations or of the calming of conscience by sham reasoning. Hesychios of Jerusalem, in his early years a pupil of St. Gregory Nazianzen, warns: "If a person deceives his conscience by false arguments, he will sleep the bitter death of forgetfulness" (*Philokalia*, I, 94).

Preceding this state of complete absence of remorse is one in which, owing to the continual indwelling in us of bad thoughts and passions, the light of conscience becomes increasingly dimmer, its voice more and more faint and indistinct, its dictates progressively distorted and suppressed. Conscience is then said to be "impure" or "defiled."

A great deal is said by the Greek Fathers regarding remorse or censure (*elenchos, katagnosis*) of conscience. This power censures our wrong acts, inner as well as outer. Hence it is sometimes characterized as the "accuser" (*antidikos*). "Conscience," says Abba Dorotheos, "is called the accuser, because it always opposes our evil will and censures us for not doing what we ought to

do, and for doing what we ought not to do, and condemns us" (*Op. cit*., p. 34). Dorotheos finds the idea of conscience as an accuser in the following statement of Jesus: "Agree with thine accuser quickly, while thou art in the way with him, lest he hand thee over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and thou be cast into prison" (MATT. 5: 25). "By In the way,' comments Dorotheos, "Jesus means 'while you are in this world,' as Basil the Great says (*op. cit*., p. 34). Nicodemus the Aghiorite observes that one acquires an accusing conscience "if he disobeys even one of the Lord's commandments, for he becomes guilty of all the rest, according to the divine James: 'Whosoever shall keep the whole law, but fail in one point, he is guilty of all' (2: 10). And why of all? Because, as Basil the Great asserts, 'all the commandments are interconnected according to the sound aim of Scripture, so that if one be broken, the others of necessity also are broken'" (*Encheiridion,* p. 188).

St. Gregory Palamas, outstanding fourteenth century exponent of Eastern Orthodox mysticism, calls attention to the involuntary (*akousios*) character of remorse (*Philokalia,* II, 291). Conscience acts independently of our will; and this accounts for its objectivity, its impartiality.

That remorse is not limited to our *deeds*, but extends to our *thoughts* and *emotions*, is attested by St. Macarius the Great, when he says that conscience "censures those thoughts that assent to sin, and reproves and directs the heart" (*Spiritual Homilies*, XV).

Conscience's activity as an accuser is a very painful experience. Chrysostom remarks that "he who lives in wickedness experiences the torments of hell prior to hell, being stung by his conscience" (*Concerning the Statues*, XVI). In a like vein, his great contemporary St. Gregory of Nyssa states: "Nothing weighs down on the soul and depresses it as conscience of sin" (*On Matthew,* Ch. 11). Similar statements occur in numerous Eastern Patristic writings, including the hymnography of the Orthodox Church. One of the hymns of the *Triodion*, the book containing the services for the period of the Great Lent and the four weeks preceding it, says in part: "Hence I have been censured, hence I the wretch have been condemned by my own conscience, than which nothing in the world is more violent" (Venice, 1876, p. 263). In another of the liturgical books of the Eastern Church, the *Octoechos* or *Parakletike*, which contains the services divided into eight modes of Byzantine chant, we find the following hymns: "I shudder, as I think of your coming, O Master; for I have my judgment prior to the Judgment, my conscience within accusing me, and tormenting me prior to the torments of hell" (Venice, 1851, p. 119).

Besides functioning as a moral guide and judge, conscience when clear acts as an awakening force in man. "A clear conscience," remarks Abba Thalassios, "arouses the soul" (*Philokalia*, I, 330). Other Fathers specify ways in which conscience awakens us. Macarius asserts that conscience "wakes up the natural thoughts of which the heart is full" (*Spiritual Homilies*, XV). "Natural thoughts" are identified with the "pure thoughts that the Lord created (*Ibid*.). St. Isaac the Syrian asserts that humility, hope in God, and moral courage are born of a pure conscience.

A defiled conscience has the opposite effects. It puts to sleep, deadens man's higher functions. Chrysostom poignantly remarks: "As in severe frost all the limbs are stiffened and dead, so truly the soul shuddering in the winter of sins also performs none of its proper functions, stiffened as it were by a frost as to conscience. For what cold is to the body, that an evil conscience is to the soul" (*Homilies on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, VII).

In speaking of the unaccusing conscience, we noted that it indicates either a state of extreme purity, or one of extreme depravity. The question arises, What happens to conscience in the latter case? Is it destroyed as a faculty, or does it simply become inoperative? The answer of the Fathers is that conscience is never destroyed, but only ceases to operate, as a result of being continually ignored and suppressed. It becomes embedded in the subconscious level of the psyche and ceases to manifest itself at the level of consciousness, becomes dead at this level. One of the hymns in the *Octoechos* says: "I present an uncorrected soul, my conscience covered with the matter of my trespasses, my heart defiled, and my thought tainted; I cry to Thee, O Lover-of-man, have compassion on me in Thy mercy" (p. 78). Abba Dorotheos similarly speaks of buried conscience. He sees the first appearance of this state as an accompaniment of the Fall. The transgression of Adam and Eve greatly affected conscience; it resulted in conscience's becoming covered up and trampled upon. Hence, "we came to need written law, the holy Prophets, and the very coming of our Savior Christ in order to unbury and resurrect it, to vivify that buried spark" (*op. cit*., p. 33). The Christian way of life, the keeping of the commandments, uncovered conscience, brought it back to consciousness. But we bury it again by transgressing the commandments of Christ. "When our conscience says, 'Do this,' and we despise it, and again it tells us, and we do not do it, but continue trampling on conscience, we bury it, and it is no longer able to speak to us clearly.. .. Like a lamp that is behind a curtain, it begins to show us things more and more dimly, more and more darkly.... Thus we do not apprehend what our conscience tells us, and hence almost think that we do not have it. But there is no one who does not have it, and it is never lost" (*op. cit*., p. 33). Similarly, Abba Isaiah the Anchorite, a contemporary of Macarius the Great, remarks that "when we do not obey our conscience, it withdraws and abandons us" (*Philokalia* 1,18).

Except in the rare instance of the saint, conscience being more or less buried in subconsciousness, we are confronted with the problem of how conscience may be brought increasingly into our consciousness, so that its voice may be heard with more and more clarity; or, expressing the matter differently, of how conscience may be purified. The Eastern Fathers offer pertinent advice, stressing the need of complete obedience to conscience, of constant inner attention and prayer.

In connection with obedience to conscience, they emphasize the need of obeying conscience in all matters, not disobeying it in anything whatsoever, regardless how small and insignificant it

may appear. "From small and trifling things," observes Abba Dorotheos, "we come to disregard big things. If, for instance, one begins to say: 'What does it matter if I say this? What does it matter if I eat this little thing? What does it matter if I look at that?' From this attitude of saying, 'What does it matter with regard to this,' and 'What does it matter with regard to that?' one develops a bad habit, and begins to disregard weightier things and to trample on his conscience. In this way, one runs the danger of falling into complete unconsciousness (*anaisthesia*) as far as conscience is concerned" (*op. cit.*, p. 34).

Obedience to conscience is analyzed by Dorotheos, Symeon the New Theologian, Nicodemus the Aghiorite, and others into a threefold guarding (*phylake*) of conscience: guarding it with reference to God, to man, and to things. We guard conscience toward God when we follow all His commandments, neglecting none. We guard it in relation to man when we avoid wronging others in any way. Finally, we guard it in relation to things when we do not misuse them, but use all as is proper.

Essential for obeying one's conscience is inner attention. This practice makes it possible for one to apprehend the indications of conscience and avoid confounding them with thoughts and feelings alien to them. The ascetic-mystical Fathers frequently speak of inner attention and at times relate it to the awakening of conscience. Isaiah the Anchorite says: "Let us not give any offence to our conscience, but observe ourselves with fear of God, until our conscience frees itself, and a union between it and us takes place" (*Philokalia,* I, 18). The union (*henosis*) spoken of here is the entrance of conscience into our consciousness. A similar statement is made by Philotheos the Sinaite. "Attention," he says, "distinctly purifies conscience; and conscience having been purified, like a light that has been uncovered, shines brightly, driving away a great darkness" (*Philokalia,* I, 371). Behind the metaphors "light" and "darkness" lies the distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness. In the Patristic writings, "light" is identified with knowledge, inner wakefulness, consciousness; "darkness," with ignorance, inner sleep, unconsciousness.

Prayer, especially mental prayer or prayer of the heart, is a most important means of awakening conscience as well as regenerating the whole man. St. Mark the Ascetic, who is said to have been a pupil of Chrysostom, remarks: "A good conscience is found through prayer" (*Philokalia*, I, 63). 73 Another saint, John of Karpathos, emphasizes the value of mental prayer or prayer of the heart, also known as the Jesus Prayer: "Through the invocation of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, our conscience is easily cleansed" (*Philokalia*, I, 180). Through this prayer more than through anything else, Divine grace is attracted within us, and it is this ultimately that effectively awakens conscience. Very pertinent in this connection is the following remark of Nicodemus the Aghiorite: "If you desire to acquire the gifts of the Spirit, first cleanse your heart of passions and the beginnings of sin, and make it a temple and abode worthy for the Holy Spirit to dwell in. How? Through attention and the return of the mind into the heart. And

following this by means of sacred mental prayer in the heart, that is: 'Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy upon me.' When you have this prayer in your heart then the all-holy and man-loving Spirit comes and dwells in you, not without your awareness, but perceptibly and manifestly. Then you receive from the Holy Spirit whatever you long for" (*Nea Klimax* —"New Ladder," 2nd ed., Volos, 1956, p. 112). One of the gifts of Divine grace, the *first* one according to Mark the Ascetic (*Philokalia,* I. 66), is the awakening of conscience.

Besides the above-mentioned most important practices for awakening conscience, there are many others of varying importance. Everything included in what the Fathers call ascesis, or spiritual "training," contributes to this great aim. Gregory Palamas points out that the soul is single yet with many powers; and that these powers are not isolated, but interconnected, so that if one of them is in a bad state all the others will be correspondingly affected (*Philokalia*, II, 306). It follows that in order to be truly successful in his endeavors to awaken his conscience, a person must simultaneously strive also to cleanse his other faculties, the whole inner man.